1: Warner E-5 (1926-1929) 1937
OI 17 Murngin OI 17

CHAPTER I

THE MURNGIN

The northern shores of Australia are separated in the east from New Guinea by the Torres Strait and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and in the west by the shallow Sea of Arafura. The Indian Ocean lies between Australia and the East Indian island of Timor. Below the Arafura is Arnhem Land, that almost blank space on the map which extends from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Indian Ocean. In the furthermost northern and eastern parts of this latter region are several tribes which may be referred to collectively as the Murngin. Their ancestors lived here many hundreds and probably thousands of years before them.[1]

Eastern and northern Arnhem Land are unpopulated by whites except for a half dozen or more missionaries who are stationed at three comparatively recent Christian outposts. Traders infrequently sail their two-masted luggers into the shallow harbors and mouths of the tidal rivers to exchange their goods with the natives; all other economic efforts have been unprofitable. On the southern borders of this huge territory white civilization is making a melancholy and profitless effort to implant its own markings in the form of cattle ranches on the bleak country that lies along the southern banks of the Roper River. A telegraph system which unites white Australia with the rest of the British Empire stretches from the populous cities of southern Australia across the barren central desert into the western border of Arnhem Land and terminates at the tiny, isolated town of Port Darwin.

The Murngin live some ten to fifteen degrees south of the equator in a land which has little elevation. The climate is tropical and marked by the sharp, seasonal cycles of the rainy and dry periods, with corresponding changes in the prevailing winds or monsoons. The long flat coastal regions have a savanna type of vegetation, with the ubiquitous mangrove here and there forming dense jungle groves along the flat sandy islands, bays, and tidal rivers. The groves of ti trees in this region are green oases which the native sees as he journeys in from the barren

[1] See Appendix I, Social Change in North Australia.

192
103
131
133

Fig. 1. Arnhem Land, showing expedition camps

3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 OII7 Murngin OII7

102
103
● 131
133

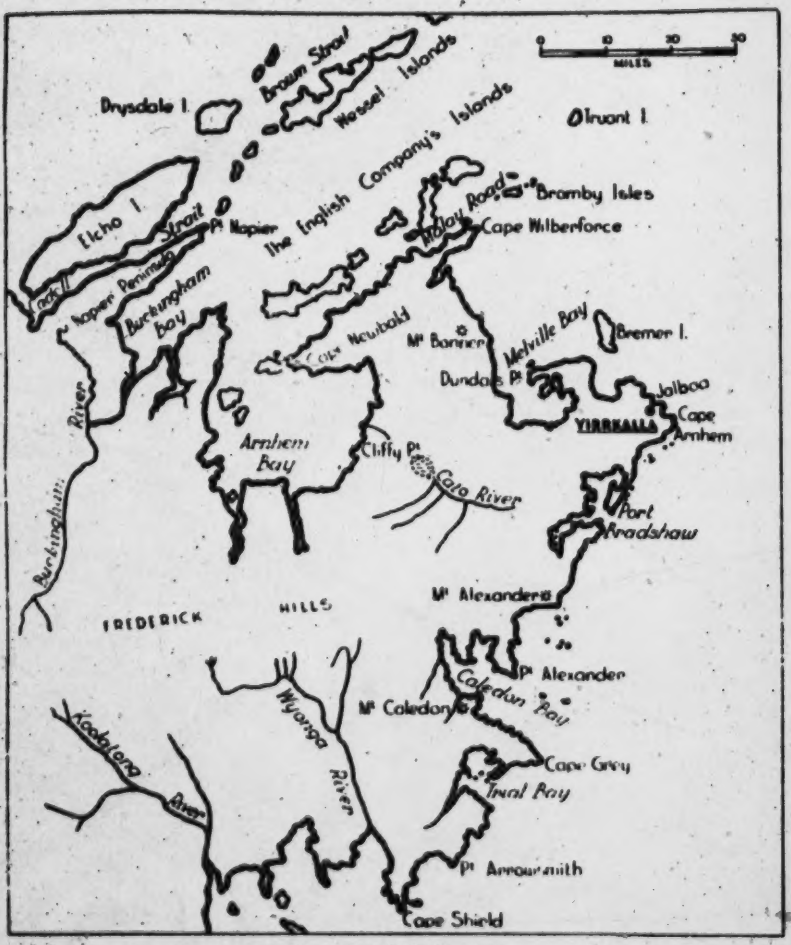


FIG. 57. Yirrkalla area

*773 776 184 The *Wawalik* myth appears to belong more particularly to the western side of Arnhem Land, and the *Djunkgao* myth to the eastern. The former myth appears to be the more complete; in fact, in some localities the myth of *Djunkgao* actually takes on some of the elements of that of the *Wawalik* sisters (p. 278). On the eastern side of Arnhem Land *Djunkgao* is a man; on the western side, two

4: Berndt & Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1948
O117 Murngin O117

particular spirit-being has its mythology, ceremonies and elaborate song cycles, some consisting of several hundreds of separate and lengthy songs. This is particularly the case with the concept of the *'Wawolak* Sisters, which have both sacred and secular songs and ceremonies.[2]

The aborigines of this area belong to what Professor Lloyd Warner has called the "Murngin" culture.[3] They consist of groups of separate clans with a more or less common cultural background[4]: "Murngin" is one name of one of these many clans. They stretch from a point north of Rose River on the south-east of Arnhem Land (opposite Groote Eylandt) north along the coast through Blue Mud and Caledon Bays, Cape Arnhem and Yirrkalla, English Company, Wessell and Elcho Islands, Arnhem Bay, Crocodile Islands (around Milingimbi) to Cape Stewart, but do not penetrate far into the interior. Their dialects vary, but belong to one language group.[5] The clans are divided between the *'jiritja* and *'du:a* patrilineal moieties. A subsection system is being gradually introduced from the south and south-west, but has not yet been fully accepted.

These natives are semi-nomadic and hunt and collect food over wide areas. They rely principally on marine foods, which are plentiful, so that their economy is more or less balanced throughout the whole year.

For many years these coastal aborigines have been in direct and indirect contact with alien groups, particularly with the Malayan and Macassan traders who travelled down to the north coast of Australia from the East Indies in search of trepang (bêche de mer) and other natural products obtained by local aborigines.[6] In the course of years of trading, these visitors had much association with the indigenous inhabitants, and established settlements at desirable sites, particularly on the north-eastern corner of Arnhem Land, where they stayed for several months in each year. After the wet season, in about May or June, they returned in their proas on the south-east winds, sometimes taking aborigines as part of their crew. This contact ended (being prohibited by law) in 1907, but Japanese pearlers continued to visit the shores up to the recent war.

Such intensive contact over a long period made a strong impression on the aborigines; this can be observed to-day in certain elements of the religious life and dogma, in secular ceremonies and songs, in mortuary rites and songs, in mythology

[2] A detailed study of north-eastern Arnhem Land religious beliefs and dogma will be published later.

[3] L. Warner, *A Black Civilisation*, 1937.

[4] They may be conveniently termed the 'Wulamba Confederacy. *Vide* also T. Webb, "Tribal Organization in Eastern Arnhem Land," *Oceania*, Vol. III, No. 4, p. 410.

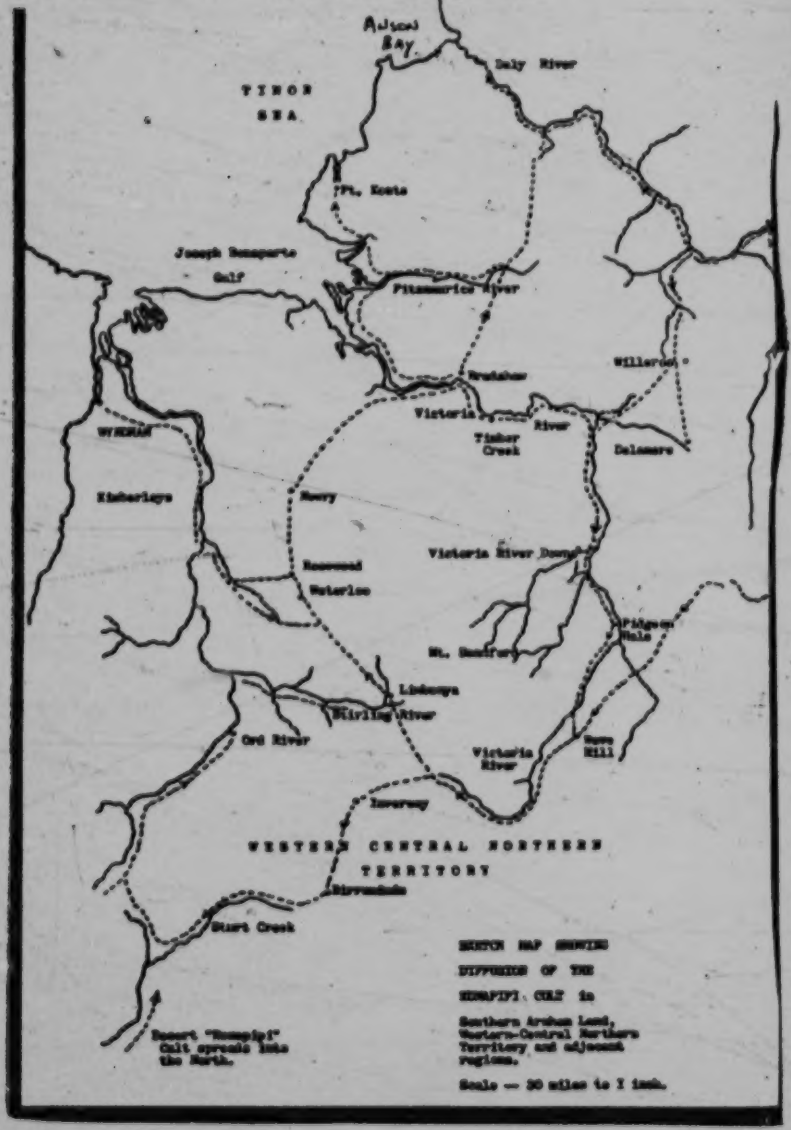
[5] *Vide* A. Capell, "Languages of Arnhem Land, North Australia," *Oceania*, Vol. XII, No. 4, and Vol. XIII, No. 1. The collective dialects of this language group can, for convenience, be called *'Miwuif 'mala*.

[6] The date of their first contact is a matter of speculation, but is possibly much earlier than has hitherto been stated. A comparatively large collection of pottery shards, recovered from Port Bradshaw, not far distant from Yirrkalla, to be discussed later, may enable an approximate date to be fixed for the establishment of the Macassan settlements, remains of which are still known to the natives.

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951

OI17 Murngin OI17

102
131
133
487
177
773



[Front End Map (A)]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
OI17 Murngin OI17

102
131
133
177
487
773

[Front End Map(B)]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
OI17 Murngin OI17

CHAPTER I

THE CULTURAL PATTERN OF NORTH-EASTERN ARNHEM LAND SOCIETY

a. The Geographical Background:

The main centre with which we shall be dealing here is Yirrkalla, in the far north-eastern corner of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The surrounding area is thickly wooded, with jungles and mangrove swamps, fresh water streams and tidal rivers, long beaches broken by sheer cliffs, and occasional islands fairly close to the shore.

Yirrkalla itself takes its name from a fresh water creek that flows into the surf beside a long white curving beach. This creek drains a wide area of lagoon and swamp, its source far back in the hilly inland. Wide grass flats, easily inundated during the monsoonal rains, and dense jungles, lie in the back country not too far from the coast line. At Yirrkalla the Methodist Overseas Mission established a station some eleven years ago: and now a Mission house on a low cliff dominates the beach, where native huts, mostly of cast-off European timber and tin, are arranged in rows. Beyond the Mission house, on a smaller beach, are other huts; and a church, store-house, dispensary and garden complete the settlement.

This Mission station is the centre for natives whose traditional home camps are at Blue Mud Bay, Trial and Caledon Bays and Port Bradshaw to the south, facing the Gulf of Carpentaria, while visitors come from Groote Eylandt, Woodah Island and Rose River. The Yirrkalla local groups belong mainly to Cape Arnhem, Bremer Island, Melville Bay, and the English Company Islands, as well as to Arnhem Bay: but natives from the Wessel and Elcho Islands, Milingimbi in the Crocodile Islands, and from the mainland to the west, do visit this region. Yirrkalla is thus a strategic base for anthropologists and missionaries who desire to contact members of various groups of a more or less similar cultural and linguistic background.

Geographically speaking, the Yirrkalla groups are comparatively isolated, for to-day only the Mission lugger calls at this depôt, with occasional visits by other Europeans who come by boat and 'plane. Yirrkalla is approximately 500 sea-miles east of Darwin, 130 miles

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
OI17 Murngin OI17

131 797 from the Church Missionary Society settlement at Groote Eylandt, and 90 miles from the nearest Methodist Mission at Elcho Island. Apart from the Mission stations of Roper River, Oenpelli, Goulburn Island, Milingimbi, Elcho Island, Yirrkalla and Groote Eylandt, which fringe the great Reserve, there is no other European settlement, except the new base subsidized by the Northern Territory Native Affairs Branch at Ambu Kambu on Groote Eylandt.

136 262 The whole region is rich in indigenous foods and resources, particularly along the coast. The sea abounds in dugong, turtle, fish, crayfish, shellfish, oysters, and crabs: inland, on the plains and in the jungles, there are wildfowl, emu, wallaby, kangaroo, and smaller animals, fruit, nuts, vegetables, berries, and a large variety of other bush foods, with quantities of fresh-water fish and crocodiles in the streams and rivers; and at times buffalo which have wandered eastwards from the Buffalo Plains west of Oenpelli. So plentiful is the food that, even in bad seasons, the quality may diminish, but rarely the quantity.

b Social Organization:

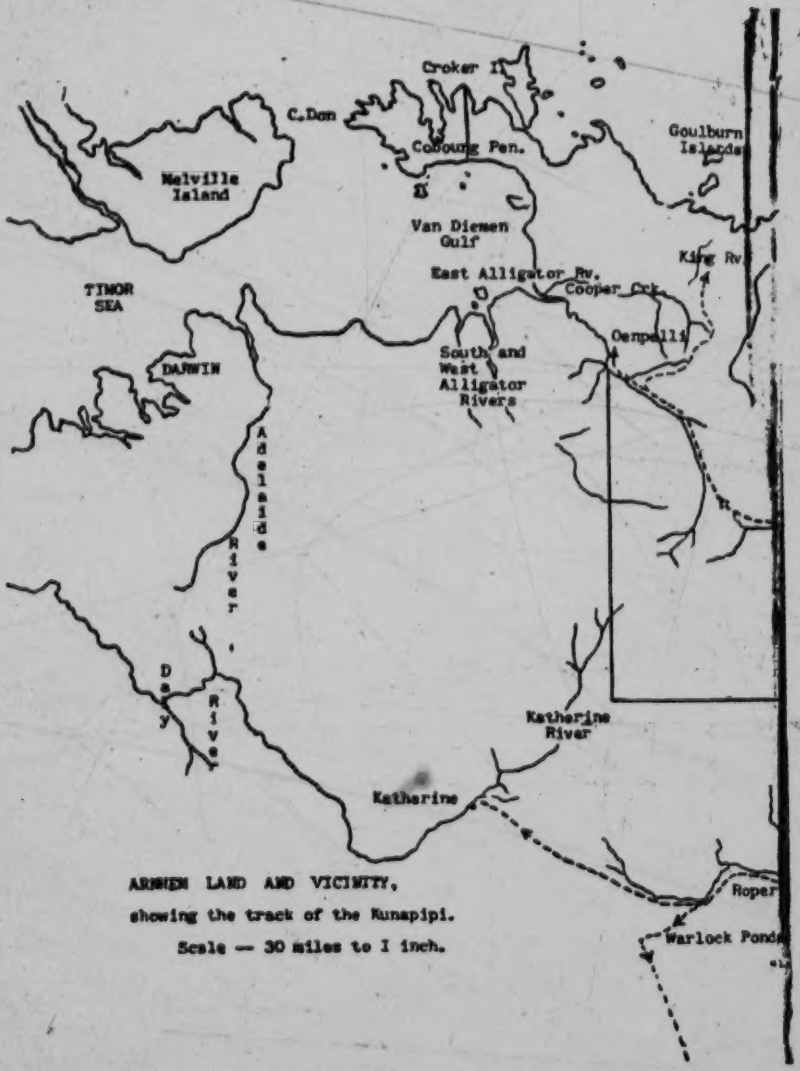
114 184 121 177 Before proceeding to our main study, it is necessary to outline briefly the structure of north-eastern Arnhem Land society. The work of Professor Lloyd Warner is the most reliable in this respect, while the Rev. T. T. Webb and Dr. Donald Thomson have written on the subject.[1] The reader will find sufficient detail in these for our present purpose. But it should be borne in mind that the organization of Yirrkalla society, although basically similar to that of Milingimbi, is in many respects decidedly different. Dr. Warner viewed aboriginal social life through the eyes of Milingimbi informants, influenced by cultural trends from Cape Stewart and the inland, while the present writer views the same position from the Yirrkalla point of view, uninfluenced to any marked degree from the west, but responding to contact from aboriginal groups to the south and south-west (this is particularly apparent in our study of the Kunapipi cult).

101 614 197 616 These people of eastern Arnhem Land, from Cape Stewart to Blue Mud Bay, had a general term for themselves—the Wulamba group of clans, forming a tribe with a more or less common cultural background: natives outside this region, such as those at Groote Eylandt, called them the "Balamumu" confederacy. Balamumu may be broadly translated as "those of the sea", that is, coastal people. The varying dialects (termed *mata*, "tongue") of these clans (*mala*)

1. L. Warner, *A Black Civilization*, New York and London, 1937; T. T. Webb, Tribal Organization in Eastern Arnhem Land, *Oceania*, Vol. III, No. 4, pp. 406–411; A. P. Elkin, Marriage and Descent in East Arnhem Land, *Oceania*, Vol. III, No. 4, pp. 412–416; D. Thomson, *Interim General Report of Preliminary Expedition to Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia*, 1935–36, Department of Interior, Canberra, 1936, pp. 31–34.

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
OI17 Murngin OI17

102
131
133
177
487
773

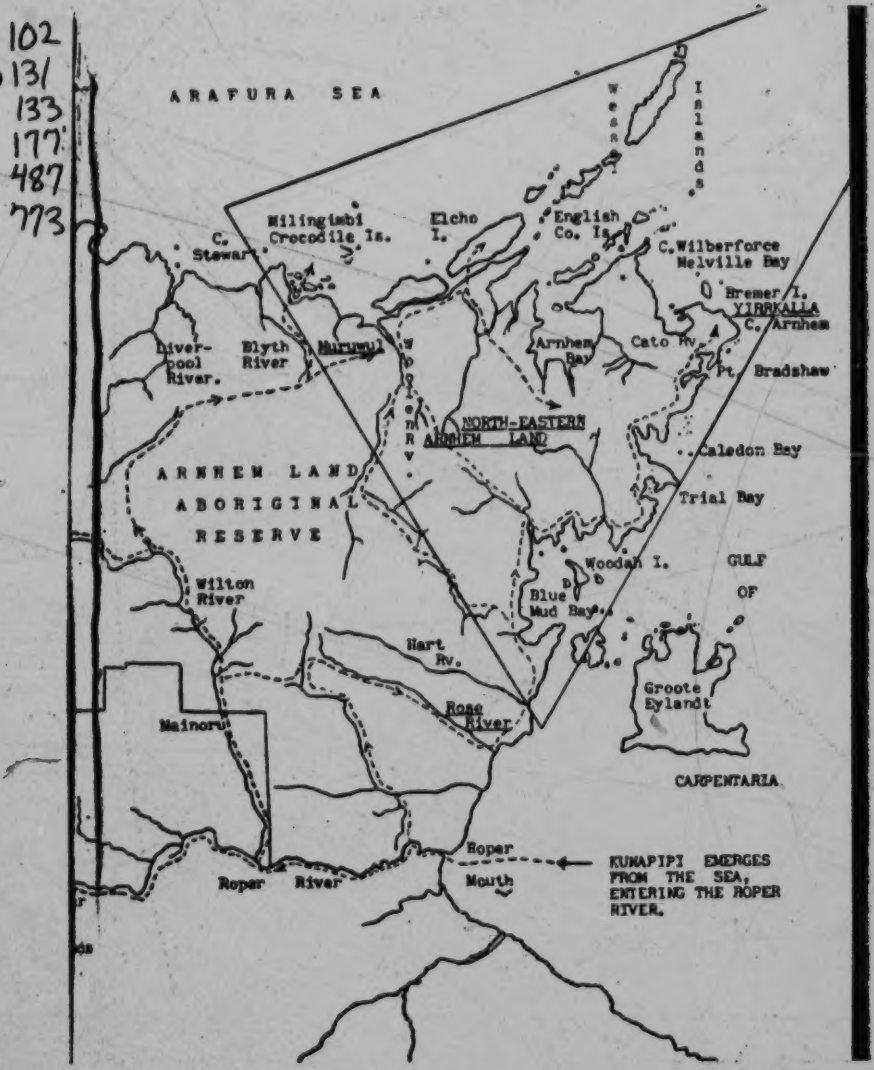


ARNHEM LAND AND VICINITY,
showing the track of the Kunapipi.
Scale — 30 miles to 1 inch.

[Back End Map (A)]

6: Berndt E-5 (1946-1947) 1951
OI17 Murngin OI17

102
131
133
177
487
773



[Back End Map (B)]

7: Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1952
OI17 Murngin OI17

language. Their society is constructed on the moiety principle, and descent is in all cases primarily patrilineal. There is no clearly defined tribe, but a series of linguistic groups associated with clans; all of these may be called, collectively, the Wulamba bloc of the Miwaitj language group (referring to the sum total of the different dialects). Yirrkalla is situated on the extreme north-east corner of Arnhem Land between Melville Bay and Cape Arnhem, and Aborigines gather there from places as far distant as Blue Mud and Caledon and Trial Bays, Rose River, and Woodah and Groote Islands in the south and south-east, and Arnhem and Buckingham Bays, Elcho, English Company and Wessel Islands in the north-west. Milingimbi is in the Crocodile Island group on the central-north coast; it is also a meeting place for members of many groups, particularly those from the mainland around the Blyth, Goyder and Woolen Rivers.

Virtually all the writer's field work has been carried out through the medium of the native language, both at Yirrkalla and Milingimbi. Knowledge of local dialects is essential in social anthropological work, and particularly in a study of Aboriginal religion. Field work at Yirrkalla was carried out in 1946–7 and at Milingimbi in 1950 (a total period of thirteen months actually working on the field in this particular region); the first period was made possible by grants from the Australian National Research Council, and was under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, while the latter period was financed by grants from the Research Committee of the University of Sydney and the Department of Anthropology of the same University. Writing up of this material was also made possible by grants from the Research Committee.

So many informants have helped in the process of collecting the data presented here that a list of their names would be tiresome and meaningless to the reader. Not only main *dua* moiety headmen, but also those of the *jiritja* moiety, contributed; and these were members of many linguistic groups. In addition, attitudes of local Aboriginal women towards this religious cult were discussed with them by my wife (Catherine Berndt), and this aided directly the analysis of certain sections. This study of the Djanggawul, then, does not express solely the information and attitudes of male natives, but takes into account both male and female elements in the culture. The practice in recording the interlinear phonetic renderings of the songs was for informants belonging to a particular area through which the Djanggawul passed to put forward those songs themselves, for it was their country and they were expected to have more complete knowledge of the songs. In this way, each

8: Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1954
OI17 Murngin OI17

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

Arnhem Land, through the centuries, has attracted to its shores a variety of both Asiatic and European voyagers, some interested in exploration for its own sake, and some for economic or commercial reasons. Between the middle of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, this northern part of Australia became known to the Western World through the discoveries of the Dutch and Portuguese.[1] Considerably earlier, however, the coastal regions of Arnhem Land had been visited regularly by Indonesian traders. The date of their first arrival has not been definitely established: but we can make tentative suggestions, based on the traditional records which the Arnhem Land natives have handed down from one generation to another.

In addition to this fairly intensive contact over a long period, Arnhem Land became comparatively well-known during the last phase of Malay-Macassan association with our north coast, and during the exploration of certain English voyagers just before and during the establishment of European settlements.

Later on came the attempted European settlement of this part of the Northern Territory, and the exploitation of its waters for marine products. Japanese and other Asiatics, as well as Europeans, took part in pearling operations; and Christian Mission stations were gradually established at various places all round the Arnhem Land coast. Today only the Missions remain. The whole vast region of Arnhem Land, some 31,200 square miles, is now an Aboriginal Reserve.

In this study of Arnhem Land, we shall see how events fall into their proper historical perspective, from the earliest known

8; Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1954
OI17 Murngin OI17

period to the present day. We shall follow the contact of the Aborigines with alien peoples, review the repercussions, and notice something of the effects upon their traditional culture.

The Arnhem Land Reserve, one of the largest in Australia, stretches east and south-east of Darwin in the Northern Territory, across to the western shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The mangrove-lined coast on the north faces the Arafura Sea, separating Australia from the densely populated islands of Indonesia and New Guinea; and adjacent to it, running from west to east, are the islands of Croker, Goulburn, Wessel and Bremer (once Melville). Into the sea here and there flow large rivers, which further inland are usually banked by thick jungles of cypress, gum, stringy-bark, wild fig, bamboo, cycad, screw-palm (pandanus), and many other trees and bushes known only to the botanist and native. And tidal salt-water creeks flow among the mangroves, the home of sea-birds, crocodiles and sharks.

On the east the same almost monotonous coast-line fronts the Gulf of Carpentaria, dotted with such islands as Woodah and Bickerton, Winchelsea and Connexion, close to Groote Eylandt.

This great Reserve is bordered on the south by the Roper River; and on the west a natural boundary of rocky hills and sandstone halts the encroaches of the buffalo hunter, who has established himself on the fertile plains and swamps around the Adelaide, Mary and Alligator rivers. In the heart of Arnhem Land, gorges, mountains, swamps and rocky plains spread through country still partially unexplored.

Scattered through the Reserve are Mission settlements controlled by the Church Missionary Society and the Methodist Overseas Mission—Oenpelli, Croker Island (a "Half-Caste" settlement), South Goulburn Island, the Crocodile Islands (Milingimbi), Elcho Island, Yirrkalla, Groote Eylandt, and Roper River. To the south-west, Beswick Government Cattle Station and Maranboy Reserve can barely be said to be in Arnhem Land properly. Near the western border of Arnhem Land, in the so-called "Buffalo country", are two unoccupied Aboriginal Reserves, the Manasi and Woolwonga; and on the south, the attraction of neighbouring cattle stations (such as Mainoru and Roper Valley) has contributed to the decline of the local population.

8: Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1954
OI17 Murngin OI17

BACKGROUND

Once the term "Arnhem Land" was applied to the whole region east of Daly River, including the area about Darwin and Katherine, Melville and Bathurst Islands, and the "Buffalo country";[3] but since the Aboriginal Reserve was established, the name has been restricted to this.

All through this region, except in parts of the interior, there is no scarcity of food. In the rivers are fresh-water fish, goannas and crocodiles, in the sea and coastal bays many varieties of fish, shell-fish, turtle, dugong and (rarely) whales. At certain seasons the swamps and rivers, streams, waterholes and jungles, teem with wild fowl; eggs are plentiful, and (according to the time of the year) there is a choice of duck, goose, tern (or sea-gull), crocodile, turtle, emu and jungle fowl. Inland and along the coast there is an abundance of meat — kangaroo, wallaby, opossum, bandicoot, porcupine and edible reptiles. Moreover there are introduced water-buffalo, which abound in western Arnhem Land, and are seen today as far east as Yirrkalla, near Cape Arnhem.

Wild honey, fruits, berries, seeds, nuts and vegetable foods such as yam and lily roots and green lily stems, are available in season. And at the tail end of the monsoonal period the sea brings to this coast, particularly on the north-east, large supplies of drifting coconut and other edible nuts.

This, then, is roughly the position of the Arnhem Land Reserve, and it is upon the natural products of this country that the Aboriginal inhabitants have in the past primarily depended. Today, however, the Aborigine does not rely solely on his environment for subsistence. Long years of alien contact have developed in him a desire for introduced goods, a desire which was fulfilled to some extent when the Mission stations were established.

In order to examine the picture more closely, and to see the events presented in some historical sequence, we shall concentrate on the northern and eastern coast of Arnhem Land, and the adjacent islands within the Reserve. This coast-line and these islands experienced alien contact much earlier than did the inland boundaries, along the Roper River and the "Buffalo" plains. The actual interior of the Reserve, except for the bush country towards the Rose River in the south-east, the Arafura and Milin-

12: Webb M-5 (ca. 1930) 1933 OI17 Murngin OI17

TRIBAL ORGANIZATION IN EASTERN ARNHEM LAND

By T. THEODOR WEBB[1]

[131] THE aboriginal peoples referred to in this paper are those occupying the country to the north-east of a line running roughly from Cape Stewart on the north coast of Arnhem Land to Blue Mud Bay in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and extending to the sea coast and the adjacent islands. The social organization of these peoples is marked 621 by a very pronounced emphasis on the importance of the horde, each of which exists as an almost entirely independent unit. These hordes are very numerous; some of them are very small, and there is definite evidence that several of them have actually become extinct, at least in so far as their patrilineal descent as a separate unit is concerned. With the few exceptions mentioned below, each of [197] these hordes, no matter how small, has its own particular dialect. In many cases the dialectal difference is small, and in at least one instance would appear to be consciously artificial.

621 The two moieties into which the aboriginal society is divided are known as Yiritcha and Dua respectively, and these names are 616 used without variation throughout the area indicated. Each horde is exclusively Yiritcha or Dua, as the case may be, and every man [582] obtains his wife from some other horde of the opposite moiety.

621 The two moieties are divided into eight subsections, four Yiritcha and four Dua, and the prevailing form of totemism includes 616 the definite relationship of all members, both male and female, of 617 each subsection (*marlk*), with some particular bird or animal, which is known by the individual as his or her *dzuŋoin*. These *dzuŋoin* have, as far as I am able to discover, no association with totem centres. Every member of the same subsection possesses the same *dzuŋoin*, irrespective of the horde to which he belongs.

[1]Chairman of the North Australia District of the Methodist Missionary Society of Australia.

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OII7 Murngin OII7

177 Aborigines could never be mistaken for liberty, civilization, and Christianity.' Early settlers appropriated everything of value, and when they came into contact with aborigines and their Stone Age beliefs and customs, they could not appreciate their complex social organization and fanatical regard for ancient hunting-grounds and sacred sites. Hence the clashes and feuds of pioneering days.

Aboriginal depopulation was not entirely due to punitive [165] measures and to introduced diseases, for Stone Age man continued to die whenever he came into contact with modern man. In 1820 the British Government granted ten thousand acres at Port Macquarie as an aboriginal reserve; a mission- [197] ary worked there for seventeen years, but by that time the people were extinct and the reserve was abandoned. A realistic missionary of that day wrote: 'Judging from present appearances, by the time the missionary shall have acquired the language so as to preach the Gospel he will have no one to preach to.'

165 177 In less than a century-and-a-half the full-blood aboriginal population of Australia declined to fifty thousand, and the majority of these exist in unwanted or poverty-stricken areas of the continent. All who have had the good fortune to see the unspoiled remnants of this, the oldest of all living races, are puzzled by this decrease in population, and vague suggestions of racial suicide through crude forms of abortion make one ask increasingly: 'Why will they not propagate?' and 'Why do they lose the will to live?' It is a racial tragedy, this diminishing of a people who traversed the hemispheres before the days of the pyramids, this crumbling of a social organization as old as gregarian man, this dissolution of a race too old to be classified with any modern race, but so human that any existing race could have evolved from them.

● 131 657 However, they are not all dead—yet! In isolated parts of north and north-west Australia nomads roam the bush and rugged mountains of large Reserves. Arnhem Land is the

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
OI17 Murngin OI17

PREFACE

greatest of the Reserves and is in the north of the Northern Territory. Its northern shores are washed by the Arafura Sea; on the east it is bounded by the Gulf of Carpentaria; and to the south lies the barrier of high, impenetrable, barren sand-stone mountains and deep gorges. Approximately thirty-four thousand square miles of this desolate country, with its aboriginal population of three thousand, was declared an Aboriginal Reserve in 1931.

The writing of this book has entailed the collecting of notes, incidents, myths, and nomads' quaint sayings, which I have jotted down on scraps of paper or on the fly-leaves of books I have had with me in the bush, in aboriginal canoes, or on luggers. In the spelling of aboriginal names and phrases I have not used any system of phonetics, but have attempted to give ordinary English letter values. 'Yulengor' is a general race-term applied by Stone Age men of east Arnhem Land to all nomads, in the way that we refer to them as aborigines. 'Yulengor' is not used elsewhere.

I gratefully acknowledge help given by Professor A. P. Elkin who prepared the illuminating introduction. But for my wife the notes would have been offered to the public years ago, and she has my thanks for the wisdom of such restraint, and for encouragement and constructive criticism as I have attempted to convey to the printed page the fascinating customs, unforgettable experiences, and mind-teasing Yulengor sayings of Arnhem Land.

W. S. C.

Brisbane, 1936